

CUSTOM GRINDING AND MILLING MANUFACTURER - AND ITS CUSTOMERS - REAP THE BENEFITS OF EMBRACING NEURODIVERSITY IN THE WORKPLACE

ABOUT PRATER INDUSTRIES, INC. Located in Bollingbrook, Illinois, Prater Industries engineers and manufactures custom grinding and milling equipment that services a variety of markets. In addition to the equipment itself, a significant portion of the company's revenue comes from the sale of replacement parts that Prater also designs and manufactures for the heavy-duty equipment they have previously sold, and which is often in operation for many, many decades.

THE CHALLENGE. For the company's first 74 years of operation, every complex engineering drawing, model, bill of material or elevation was prepared manually and stored as a hard copy. Prater joined the digital revolution in 1999 and upgraded their engineering and production processes to include computerized, digital drawings of the equipment and replacement parts they produce, but the dilemma of what to do with prior records remained. Existing customers continued to order replacement equipment and parts based on those original drawings, so for almost 20 years Prater Customer Service personnel undertook the laborious process of manually searching those hard copy files. In 2016, Prater's new leadership team recognized this deficiency and saw an opportunity to improve its customers' experience, increase sales and improve Prater's engineering process by scanning and organizing these 74 years of hard-copy files into digitized ones. Prater attempted to outsource and hire part-time talent with little luck, and it became a struggle for Prater to provide optimal customer service as the vast scope of the project and high employee turnover were working against them.

MEP CENTER'S ROLE. The leadership team at Prater reached out to IMEC, part of the MEP National Network™, to help them solve their challenge. The IMEC expert introduced Prater leadership to the idea of creating a neurodiverse work environment that incorporated the autistic workforce. Companies benefit from neurodiversity in the workplace by experiencing high retention in repetitive jobs. IMEC partnered with Autism Workforce to help Prater leverage their resources. Autism Workforce helps companies align the workplace to suit employees with autism and by properly placing individuals in appropriate positions. Autism Workforce trained the Prater staff that would interact with Marice, their new neurodiverse employee, to outline communication strategies for success. They also created universal standard work and implemented visual work instructions. Once Prater hired a neurodiverse employee, IMEC and Autism Workforce assisted Prater with the onboarding process until productivity stabilized.

"This project not only helps Prater provide better customer service and grow sales, it provides the opportunity for someone who might not have had the chance to be part of the workforce be an integral part of the solution."

-Pete Hinz, Vice President and General Manager

RESULTS



Reduced search time from 1-3 hours to **3** minutes or less



Improved employee engagement



Improved corporate culture



Reduced turnover rate



Improved customer satisfaction

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